

To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values inherent in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Civilization.*"

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er 79

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Spiritual Development Through Neighborhood Fellowship Groups

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The rambling white farm house was ablaze with light. Inside were about thirty people of various ages. Some had walked more than a mile rather than miss the evening's program or use precious gasoline coupons. It was one of the neighborhood fellowships conducted by the church at the Center.

Members and non-church members were both there enjoying the events of the evening. They had sung the old American folk songs and the hymns of the church. A high school student had led a brief service of worship. Then followed a half hour of spirited discussion in which youth and adults debated the pros and cons of "Christian Stewardship and Soil Conservation" under the leadership of a neighbor. After this apples and pop-corn were served and the adults proceeded to talk about crops, public affairs and church events, while two of the young people moved into another room to direct a dozen children in games. The other young people gathered around the piano for more singing. There were no distinctions of dress or class, and everyone, including the new family in the neighborhood, was made to feel at ease. All sensed a genuine spiritual vitality and departed homeward having found deep satisfactions. They were not aware, however, of the significance to church and nation of this evening spent together in fellowship.

Fellowship Movements

One observer reports literally hundreds of such groups springing up informally all over the world. They are often formed on an interest-group basis. We are most concerned here with fellowship groups based on localities within the parish.

Such groups are found in both rural and urban churches. If formed in rural neighborhoods they can be vitally important for the spiritual development of individuals and congregations and, therefore, the Christianizing of rural life.

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"The neighborhood is a residential grouping of families, the members of which are mutually acquainted and stand in a cooperative relation to each other." It involves face-to-face contacts. At present it is largely overlooked as a natural social unit. The churches are guilty of this and they are thus missing certain natural advantages for intimate fellowship which they possess as compared with urban churches. Must we not conclude that this partially explains the failure to achieve greater effectiveness in rural church work? A genuine fellowship is essential for successful churches. It must be inclusive, not exclusive, and seek to throw the arms of Christian friendship about everyone in the vicinity. Such fellowship is a result of study and prayer and action together, for, like many other spiritual values, it is not laid hold upon directly but is a by-product resulting from activity undertaken in common.

We are offering here some specific suggestions for a plan which will enable parishes to carry the church to the people through neighborhood prayer and discussion groups which shall meet regularly in the homes under the leadership of laymen specially trained by the pastors. We are convinced of the need to discover additional channels for the release of the great spiritual power which God holds in reserve for us, of the need for Christian adult education to give that spiritual power intelligent direction, and of the need to shift more of the church program into the homes where it will be less formal and closer to the people. Homes are precious centers for religious education and spiritual fellowship. There has been enough experience to indicate that such a program as suggested can increase the spiritual dynamic of present-day Christians and afford a means of reaching those not now reached by organized religion. It can help satisfy the hunger of people who are attracted by the holiness groups or by Christian Science or Unity.

There is ample historical precedent for such fellowship groups. They have existed at various times from the earliest days of Christianity. Jesus' group experience with his disciples might be so construed. Then there was the group which gathered with him at various times in the Bethany home, the groups which the early apostles had throughout the Mediterranean world, and such comparatively recent groups as the Methodist Class Meetings and others of a similar nature. They had an important spiritual function. Our greater knowledge of the relationship of psychology and educational procedures to spiritual development should help us avoid some difficulties of the past. The rural churches have the best of all opportunities to renew the use of fellowship groups.

The Need for Such Groups

Man was not made to be submerged in the mass. Midway between the individual in his family circle and the great outside world there is a community to which he belongs. He is first a member of his family and then of his neighborhood, and his neighborhood is a component part of his community. After these comes citizenship in state, nation and world. Man needs fellowship, and fellowship depends upon face-to-face relationships. The importance of these neighborhood relationships and the opportunities which they present for the reconstruction of rural society and a more satisfying life daily becomes more apparent.

The small group, whether organized on the neighborhood basis or not, is needed by the church in order to supplement the mass meeting type of gathering. The eleven o'clock service on Sunday morning is of the mass meeting type, be the congregation large or small.

"Neighbor" Means "Near Burgher"

"Neighbor" means "near burgher" or "nigh farmer." It is truly a rural term, and neighboring is a genuine rural experience. It still means something vital despite much shifting of rural populations, interest groups which take people outside the locality, the development of more nearly self-contained farmsteads, and what might be called the de-personalizing of social relationships. The war is likely to make neighboring still more vital, for people draw together in times of disaster and emergency.

It is true that the rural neighborhood has declined in the past. Everyday experiences and scientific observation alike bear witness to this. Nevertheless, much neighboring has continued and one suspects the changes have been more apparent than real. The re-discovery of the neighborhood is a present-day phenomenon. Social scientists, the United States Department of Agriculture with its aim to put a planning committee into every rural neighborhood in the country, and other agencies are discovering this social unit. One of the outstanding uses of the neighborhood unit is by the Ohio Farm Bureau through "advisory councils" for its cooperatives.

There can be a building-up process in the neighborhood as well as a deteriorating one. The neighborhood is the smallest locality unit in the democratic process and has a vital place to play if the citizen's dormant leadership and social energies are to be released for local improvement. If there were more local participation, might it not be reasonable to expect greater participation eventually in the larger affairs as well? Here is an opportunity for the church to make an important contribution to democracy as well as religion.

We have always had informal discussion groups in rural life. Notwithstanding the so-called humor of city dailies in these recent years, the old-time "cracker-barrel" discussions and the "spit-and-whittle" clubs have been important forums of local public opinion dealing with issues from near and far. The noon-hour discussions of the old-time threshing rings and the after-Sunday dinner arguments of family and neighborhood groups are vividly remembered by many of us. They are not entirely relics of a bygone era. Discussions in informal groups still exist, and the discerning person can find them in any community. Public and private agencies, particularly the rural church, may well encourage and sponsor them during the immediate future.

More specifically, some of the needs which can be met by the neighborhood fellowship groups are:

1. To provide informal fellowship, such as the homes can provide more easily than public places.
2. To make neighbors better acquainted and thus build unity.
3. To reach the unreached.
4. To bring group experiences nearer to the people, especially in view of war-time travel restrictions.
5. To give experience in the democratic processes of discussion and planning and offset regimentation.
6. To develop more lay leadership of religious meetings, and lay participation.
7. To center more of the church's program in the homes.
8. To deepen the spiritual life.

Getting Started

How to begin? Like any idea, it begins with an individual. This person is most likely to be the pastor but may be a layman. The procedure will depend somewhat upon the denominational pattern and the individual's own methods of launching new ventures. However, the idea may well be discussed in sermons, before the official board, and in pastoral calls. A small planning committee should then be selected to help develop all the local adaptations. It may be a hand-picked committee or comprised of volunteers but in either case all of its members should be vitally interested before their appointment. An experimental attitude should prevail but be highly expectant of success.

Only a few groups should be carried on during the first season or two. Each group should meet five or six times only, and then halt for an appraisal period and for planning the next series.

The time of year to launch the first series is highly important and will depend upon local conditions. The summer will be unwise for most agricultural areas; also the spring planting season. Commercial apple-growing communities must avoid the picking season. In other words, in this as well as in all other affairs of the church's program, account should be taken of the year-round work schedule of the farm people. To do otherwise is unnecessarily to court defeat.

In locating the first groups it is a good plan to put one in the village, one out in the farther reaches of the community, and one closer in. Each group should have from three to ten families. Men, women and children all must be included. Experience has shown that the older children and young people often participate readily in such small informal groups and do not feel so shy as might be expected. Furthermore, their presence is a continual challenge to the leader to keep the discussion in simple, non-technical terms. The children can share as fully as the adults in the worship and game periods. A special effort should be made to secure the attendance of people not now being reached by the church. Attendance inducements are: invitations personally extended by the hosts and the presiding chairman of the group, the informal nature of the meetings, and freedom from the necessity to "dress up."

Leaders and Their Selection

The selection and preparation of the group leaders is a major concern. Let it be clearly understood that the pastor should never lead the groups himself. Failure to observe this rule is probably the chief weakness of present groups. The pastor's function is to train the lay leaders and to give them every opportunity to develop.

Two types of leaders are recommended for each group,--a presiding chairman and a discussion leader. If possible, both should live in the neighborhood and thus be natural members of their group. The function of the chairman is to direct the worship and other parts of the evening's program or see that they are taken care of, to introduce the discussion leader, and to assist the hostess in physical arrangements. He may well be that person who has the position of prestige in the group and is most honored and trusted. Should the pastor have difficulty in recognizing who this person may be in each neighborhood, assistance may be found in the book, "Leadership for Rural Life," by Sanderson.* The dis-

*Leadership for Rural Life, by Dwight Sanderson, Association Press, New York

discussion leader may be permanent for an entire series or be one of a rotating group. In the former case the pastor and planning committee may select him on the basis of recognized abilities. We suggest one leader for the first series of meetings but thereafter a rotating leadership selected and trained according to the Home Bureau pattern.

The Home Bureau Method

The Home Bureau's pattern for selecting and training discussion leaders and choosing topics is somewhat as follows: The county office circulates among the local units (which are usually organized on a neighborhood basis) a check list of available topics for the next year. After discussion the members mark those in which they are most interested. The county program is made up on the basis of the frequency of requests for various topics, and this is submitted to the state extension office. The assignment of subject-matter specialists (teachers) is made accordingly and a schedule arranged for their visits to the county. At the county seat the specialist meets a group of women, each of whom represents a unit which has selected that topic. The members of a unit take turns in going to the central point for such lessons and demonstrations. The specialist provides the unit representatives with both the content of a lesson and the method for imparting it to others. A few days later the member of the unit shares the lesson with the other members of her unit and in so doing becomes a functional leader for an afternoon. The writer has been astonished at the development of latent and unsuspected leadership qualities in certain women over a period of a few years. To be sure the lessons deal largely with the use of manipulative skills, but, even so, the method is a valid one and should be copied by the church.

The pastor is the subject-matter specialist who trains the discussion leaders in advance of their neighborhood meetings. He will painstakingly give them two things: the materials they will need, and the method of imparting them by the use of group discussion. He will take care to use the method advocated for them. The pastor may visit the groups occasionally but not lead them.

Topics for Discussion

The training method described presupposes that each group will use the same topics although some churches may find it desirable to do otherwise. The topics for the first series of meetings may be selected by the planning committee, and thereafter determined by the groups. The topics may rightly follow any range of interests which the people have, so long as they are kept close to every-day interests and felt needs. Those which deal with social and economic questions should be related to religious principles and biblical references.

Finding source materials may be a problem at first, but an exploration of the field will disclose an amazing amount of material. Pains will have to be taken in many cases to re-adapt them to the understanding of the people. Most of the discussion materials coming from the press are written over the heads of folks. The United Christian Adult Movement pamphlets of the International Council of Religious Education are excellent if wisely used. The educational and missionary boards of the denominations have valuable material. Bulletins from such organizations as the Public Affairs Committee may be used. The United States Department of Agriculture and certain state agricultural colleges have discussion bulletins dealing with a variety of rural life themes. Enterprising pastors may find a creative

outlet for their energies by writing their own discussion materials.

Frequency of Meetings

The frequency of meetings will depend upon community circumstances. Most churches will probably have to be satisfied with monthly meetings except possibly during Lent at which time many of them already have a pattern of weekly gatherings.

Some churches may find it desirable to have the topics of the monthly group meetings related to the addresses or forums at the monthly or quarterly Church Family Night gatherings in the church. This plan is suggested by the Des Moines, Iowa, experiment in adult education during the early thirties. Twenty-five neighborhood forums were established, so located as to be within walking distance of everyone in the city. These fed into large city-wide forums which, while more spectacular and having much importance, were found not to be so basic as the smaller groups.

It will not be sufficient merely to have the neighborhood groups discuss problems. We need go nowhere else than to Jesus' experience with his disciples to discover this. He sent them out to work two by two as members of a group fellowship to which they were to return. Their work was enriched by the consciousness of fellowship and their fellowship was immensely strengthened from putting their ideas into operation. So can it be with the members of the neighborhood groups. If the discussions are well directed, fruitful action will begin to come from them. They can have a dynamic effect upon the entire church program and the community.

Objections

Objections will be raised to the idea of neighborhood fellowship groups. Some of them will be as follows: The community is over-organized now and the people are too busy; there is no way to get to the meetings; the pastor does not have time to give direction to the plan or does not know how.

That communities are in a sense not over-organized is suggested by a Cornell University study which revealed that half of the farm operators studied did not belong to any organization. It is admitted that some people are over-busy, and that most communities need a correlation of the programs and time schedules of their organizations. It is also true that war-time activities have absorbed much of the energies of some people. However, in the face of all this it should be remembered that it is highly important that the primary social groups be strengthened and the democratic group process kept functioning. If the church does not do this, and in so doing build spiritual vitality, other agencies will soon be found at the task in many communities.

As for the second objection of not being able to get to the meetings, there should eventually be enough groups so that people can reach them without walking more than one or two miles. Restrictions of travel may prove to be a golden opportunity for developing neighborhood groups as the only way in which some former church-goers can be kept in fellowship with the congregation.

As for the pastor, he will find the time, knowledge, and skill if he

considers neighborhood groups to be truly important.

Use an Appealing Name

We have termed these groups "Neighborhood Fellowships." The name is not important but should not sound formidable to the people. It might be advisable to avoid calling them "study groups"! Some names now in use for various types of meetings in homes are:

1. Fireside Gatherings
2. Inner Prayer Circle
3. Farmers' Fellowships
4. Church of the Isolated
5. Fellowship of Prayer and Bible Study
6. Cottage Meetings
7. Christian Cells
8. Good Neighbor Nights

Although we have discussed the fellowship in terms of a single church, no opportunity should be missed to get inter-church cooperation. Increased joy in fellowship and more participation by members of the various neighborhoods are likely to result if the churches join in a common venture.

Personalized Religious Nurture Made Possible

These groups have vast possibilities educationally, socially, and spiritually. Their implications for the future of rural religion and democracy are many. Society needs the nourishment which comes from small social groups. Some of the Ohio County Farm Bureaus have been rightly maintaining that: "The missing link in Democracy is the small neighborhood study-action group. The people will lift themselves up through the exchange of ideas. -- The world is a lot of neighborhoods. If we make our neighborhood better that helps to make the world better." E. C. Lindeman has been making a plea recently for "little friendship patterns" in neighborhood groups. Arthur E. Holt said not long before his death: "Unless a thing is local it isn't alive." The neighborhood is local. If democracy has a "Growing edge," it is there. If religion contains intimate human fellowship, it is found in the family and small group.

We may sometimes produce wheat and a few other crops by mass production methods, but most growing things are not so produced. A parable may be seen in the old adage, "The eye of the master fatteneth his cattle." This emphasizes attention to individuals and to small groups of individuals. So, too, with religious nurture, growth comes by personal attention.

The pastor, who is the husbandman, must provide a personal and group ministry to his flock. Let it be remembered that his flock includes the unreached and unheld as well as the active and zealous. The Christian convert, new or old, needs: something to learn,--truth; something to share,--fellowship; something to do,--service; something to worship,--God. The Neighborhood Fellowship holds promise of being one of the important ways of achieving this. We trust that many more churches will take up the idea, adapt it to their situations, use and perfect it. In so doing they may be assured of spiritual power for it was the Master who promised "Where two or three are gathered in My name there I will be in the midst of them."

